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Self-Portrait as Visual Artist: Chantal Akerman's *Ma mère rit*



Marion Schmid

New kinds of hybrid textualities, combining verbal and visual media, have surged in the recent past due to the emergence of new multimedia technologies in the wake of the digital revolution as well as the broader cultural shift towards the visual and the dissolution of media boundaries in contemporary artistic practice.¹ Especially in the domain of life-writing, and more particularly in women's self-narratives, creative explorations of the interface between word and image have opened up new avenues—both formal and thematic—for articulating selfhood, while also exploring wider issues such as interpersonal and intergenerational relations, trauma, illness or death.² Photography, the first modern visual medium, holds a special attraction for self-

¹On the reasons for the “recent visual swell in literature” see Shirley Jordan, “Interfaces: Verbal/Visual Experiment in New Women's Writing in French,” *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France. Life as Literature*, ed. Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) 196–211 (197). On hybrid textualities, see the special issues of the following journals: *Dalhousie French Studies* 68 (2004), “Hybrid Voices, Hybrid Texts”; *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008); *Yale French Studies* 114 (2009), “Writing and the Visual Image Today”; *Nottingham French Studies* 53.2 (2014), “Photography in Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures.”

²Among the rich literature on the word/image interface in life-writing see for instance Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997); Nathalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell and Ann Miller, eds., *Textual and Visual Selves. Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2011); Magali Nachtergaele, *Les Mythologies individuelles. Récit de soi et photographie au 20^e siècle* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012) and Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013). On photographic “imagetexts” and their role in shaping personal and cultural memory see Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997).

narrative experimenters, thanks to its privileged link to memory and its capacity to capture the past. André Breton in *Nadja* (1928) and *L'Amour fou* (1937) was one of the first authors to incorporate visual materials into autobiographical writing, thus launching a genre we now call "photobiography."³ Yet, if the classical avant-gardes of the 1920s and '30s, as Magali Nachtergaele explains, place the relation between literature and photography under the sign of the "rapport sur soi, voire, du reportage sur soi," it took a while until the recourse to photography became more widespread in autobiographical, and more recently, autofictional writing.⁴ Barthes's seminal *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), richly illustrated with photographs from the author's personal archives, and his semi-autobiographical *La Chambre claire* (1980)—a liminal text poised between theoretical essay and self-narrative—marked a turning point in the evolution of self-writing as an increasingly hybrid, intermedial genre. Over the past forty years or so (with a notable surge since the 1990s), writers and artists as diverse as Georges Perec, Christian Boltanski, Hervé Guibert, Marie N'Diaye, Annie Ernaux, Sophie Calle or Camille Laurens have worked on the intersection between the verbal and the visual to interrogate questions of self, belonging and subjectivity. The technical media of reproduction they enlist in their creative works (first and foremost photography, but also, increasingly, film or video installation) far from holding a merely documentary or illustrative function, further dilute the already porous boundary between life and fiction, troubling the notions of truthfulness and objectivity that are central to life-writing.⁵

An intrepid transgressor of media and genre boundaries, the great filmmaker, writer and video artist Chantal Akerman, who died in 2015, has bequeathed us one of the most original projects of self-

³The term "photobiography" was coined by the photographer and director of the *Cahiers de la photographie*, Gilles Mora, but has been disavowed since by Mora on account of the allegedly simplistic biographical usage of photographs in many such works. See Magali Nachtergaele, "Photographie et machineries fictionnelles," *Epistémocritique* 6 (2010).

⁴Nachtergaele, "Photographie et machineries fictionnelles."

⁵See Nachtergaele, "Photographie et machineries fictionnelles." Inversely, Fabien Arribert-Narce distinguishes between two tendencies in the use of photography: on the one hand, an "écriture de notation de la vie" in the tradition of Barthes, which uses photography as a way of capturing autobiography as objectively as possible; on the other, a fictionalizing tendency where photography serves as a tool for identity performance and mise en scène. While his typology is seductive, the author himself admits that any clear-cut binary would be too crude a tool to describe the manifold forms of verbal/visual interaction in self-writing. "De la 'notation' à la 'fictionalisation' de la vie: panorama des tendances photobiographiques dans la littérature française des années 1970 à nos jours," *Nottingham French Studies* 53.2 (2014): 216–31.

representation at the interface between verbal and visual media, sustained over a career that spans almost half a century.⁶ Akerman appears as autobiographical subject in a number of her films, including the short *La Chambre* (1972), the epistolary film *News from Home* (1976) and the experimental documentary *Là-bas* (2006), the latter two exploring selfhood by means of voice-over and off-screen voice rather than through an embodied physical presence. In the course of the 1980s and 90s, a series of self-portraits—*Lettre d'une cinéaste* (1984), *Portrait d'une paresseuse* (1986), and *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996)—offered a refreshing take on filmic self-representation, humorously yoking lived experience and artistic creation. If *News From Home* and the autobiographically inspired *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) had explored questions of filial relations and intergenerational transmission in cinematic form, the autofictional text *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998) first transposed these concerns into literature, a medium Akerman repeatedly declared to be her initial preference as an artist.⁷ The richly illustrated *Autoportrait en cinéaste* (published in conjunction with the 2004 retrospective of her work at the Centre Pompidou, Paris), a diary-type intellectual autobiography written in meandering, ruminating prose, further testified to the artist's resistance to conventional forms of self-representation.

Just as her filmic work embraced the wider realms of expanded cinema and installation art in the early 1990s, so also was the autobiographical project transposed into new medial forms. In 1998, one of her first video works, the aptly named *Selfportrait/Autobiography: A Work in Progress*, combined edited passages from four iconic Akerman films—*Hotel Monterey* (1972), *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), *Toute une nuit* (1982) and *D'Est* (1993)—overlaid by the voice of the artist reading *Une famille à Bruxelles*. The two-part installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (2004), similarly wed the written to the visual, albeit in more overtly autobiographical form. In the first room, selected phrases from the diary of Akerman's maternal grandmother, Sidonie Ehrenberg, an aspiring artist who was murdered in Auschwitz, are projected onto a diaphanous tulle spiral; in the second, a split-

⁶I have treated elsewhere the crossover between the literary and the cinematic in Akerman's work, with specific reference to her project of self-representation in her filmic work, her autofictional narrative *Une famille à Bruxelles* and her installation art. See my "Between Literature and the Moving Image: The Cinematography of Chantal Akerman," *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 7 (2013): 73–84.

⁷See Chantal Akerman, "Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln in einem leeren Kühlschrank laufen," *Retrospektive Chantal Akerman* ed. Astrid Ofner, Claudia Siefen and Stefan Flach (Vienna: Schüren, 2011) 73.

image documentary shows the director and her mother, the Holocaust survivor Natalia Akerman, who, for the first time, talks about her experience in the camps with her daughter. As Edna Moshenson explains, "Taken together, the two parts of the installation . . . summarize years of creative work in which Akerman searched for a way to replace an invented memory and autobiography with a reconstruction of her family biography through a process of opening up and talking, acceptance and reconciliation with the past."⁸

Akerman's acclaimed photobiography *Ma mère rit*, shortlisted for the 2013 Prix Goncourt, provides another piece in this labyrinthine project of self-representation where the visual and the verbal, documentary, fiction and autobiography intersect in a complex crisscrossing between art and life, creation and experience. Together with her last film, *No Home Movie* (2015), shot just months before Natalia Akerman's death, this candid account of Akerman grappling with her mother's illness has become the testament of an artist whose whole oeuvre, more or less explicitly, was fuelled by the mother figure. The book is beautifully illustrated by images of the artist's archive, ranging from family photos to stills from her moving image work. Published in the *Mercure de France's* "Traits et portraits" series, Akerman joins a distinguished list of writers, poets, filmmakers, painters and fashion designers (J. M. G. Le Clézio, Pierre Alechinsky, Christian Lacroix, to name only a few) in an exercise of self-portraiture at the verbal/visual interface. As the editor, Colette Fellous, points out, the visual documents have their own story to tell: "[l]es textes sont ponctués de dessins, d'images, de tableaux ou de photos qui habitent les livres comme une autre voix en écho, formant presque un récit souterrain."⁹

Together with *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, *Ma mère rit* at first seems to constitute the most overtly autobiographical text in an oeuvre that gradually shifted from autofiction to more direct engagements with the artist's family and personal history. Indeed, the book is explicitly marketed as an intimate self-portrait offering insight into the personal experiences that shaped Akerman's oeuvre, as evidenced on the back cover:

Depuis cet autoportrait écrit à vif, dans la brûlure, l'intensité et la cruauté du quotidien, Chantal Akerman nous confie pour la première fois la matière même de toute son œuvre, de toute sa vie. . . . *Ma mère rit* est

⁸Edna Moshenson, "Chantal Akerman: A Spiral Autobiography," *Chantal Akerman: A Spiral Autobiography*, ed. Edna Moshenson (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2006) 19.

⁹"Traits et portraits," *Mercure de France*, *Mercure de France*, n.d. Web. <http://www.mercuredefrance.fr/collection-Traits_et_portraits-21-1-1-0-1.html> [accessed 14 November 2014].

une magnifique plongée dans le cœur, le rire, les joies et les blessures de Chantal Akerman.¹⁰

Yet, unsurprising for an artist who persistently renewed artistic forms and genres, *Ma mère rit* is not to be confused with any traditional type of autobiographical writing. Representative of the wider oeuvre into which it inserts itself, this auto-portrait interrogates any stable notions of selfhood or identity, creatively exploring the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. As we shall see, the self is decentered through a conflation of subject and object positions, emblematic of the artist's struggle to access an autonomous form of selfhood. Acknowledging the fictional dimension inherent in self-writing and attentive to the limits of verbal expression, especially in a family context marked by trauma, Akerman seeks an authentic language to give voice to suffering and grief. What is more, the book's ambivalent verbal/visual interface, further welding the autobiographical and the fictional, carves out pathways between lived experience and artistic representation. Self-writing here, I will argue, operates in a hybrid zone where life and art have become permeable.

Je tu il elle: the Self in Polyphony

A relational memoir as well as a confessional text in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Confessions* constitute the Ur-text of French self-writing, *Ma mère rit* interweaves in sustained counterpoint the artist's coping with the illness and near death of her mother with her troubled relationship with a young woman, elliptically named "C." As in a musical piece, Akerman's anguished concern for her mother intersects with the gradual break-up with her lover by means of a dense system of echoes and leitmotifs, which, through their interlacing, shed light on one another. Both relationships are caught in a web of often ambiguous, indeed contradictory emotions, where guilt and anger, helplessness and revolt, intermingle uncomfortably, and where empathy with the other gives way to lassitude. Both provoke a sense of entrapment brought sharply into relief by Akerman's laconic comment "J'ai l'habitude de me créer des prisons" (95). As the narrative unravels—albeit in the concentric, non-chronological fashion that characterises many works of female self-writing—explicit textual echoes put the two stories in relation: the mother's threat to punch her daughter ("je vais te donner un coup," 47) becomes a reality in

¹⁰Chantal Akerman, *Ma mère rit* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2013).

C's physical aggression, which leaves the artist with a black eye and swollen face (133); Akerman's matricidal thoughts ("Je me dis je vais la tuer," 67) resonate in her confession to a friend that "[u]n jour . . . ça [her relationship with C.] va finir par un meurtre" (97–98). Both stories are undergirded by the artist's revelation of her bipolar disorder, whose origins she speculatively locates in too close a bond with the mother figure during early childhood (90).

Despite its deceptively upbeat title,¹¹ *Ma mère rit*, with the exception of its framing narrative situated in the present, is a singularly bleak text. The candor with which Akerman talks about her relations to both mother and lover as well as her frankness in describing raw and difficult emotions are deeply troubling, even in a culture where the exposure of painful filial or love relationships and the traumatic experience of personal illness or loss have become a central part of women's self-representation. (One may think of, for instance, Annie Ernaux's "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*" and *Se perdre* which, respectively, chronicle her mother's death from Alzheimer's disease and her obsessive relationship with a Russian man; or of Sophie Calle's controversial video installation capturing the last moments of her mother).¹² As in her filmic work, which valorises the female quotidian with its often repetitive rites and practices, Akerman casts a spotlight on what one critic has called "la banalité monstrueuse de sa vie."¹³ The daily routines of getting washed, eating and sleeping, hospital visits and trips forwards and backwards between New York, Mexico (where the mother stays with her younger daughter after an operation), Paris and Brussels, walking the dog and fending off the "black sun" of depression are the viscous matter of a life on the edge of collapse, but no less bogged down in the mere materiality of existence.

Akerman first offered a poignant portrait of a family's coming to terms with the illness of a parent figure in the already mentioned *Une famille à Bruxelles*, inspired by the death of her father, Jacques Aker-

¹¹Akerman explains in an interview with Frédéric Bonnaud that the title was inspired by the biblical story of Sarah, who laughs when the angel of God announces to her that, despite her advanced age, she will bear a child. "Portrait du passé, portrait d'une génération," *Plan B... pour Bonnaud, Le Mouv'*, 26 October 2013. Web. 24 July 2016.

¹²For an excellent overview of female life-writing, including practices that exceed media boundaries, see Shirley Jordan, "État present: Autofiction in the Feminine," *French Studies* 67.1 (2012): 76–84. On women's writing in contemporary France more generally see also Gill Rye and Michael Worton, *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002).

¹³Gérard Lefort, "Akerman retourne chez sa mère," *Libération*, 23 October 2013 <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/2013/10/23/akerman-retourne-chez-sa-mere_941834> [accessed 14 November 2014].

man. But where this earlier text merely hinted at its autobiographical borrowings through parallels between the characters and the members of Akerman's family—including herself appearing in the guise of an anonymous filmmaker who divides her life between Paris and New York—*Ma mère rit* seals an autobiographical pact by way of an explicit identification between the author and the protagonist of the narrative. For readers, there can be no doubt that the text's principal character is indeed Chantal Akerman. Yet this is not to say that the book constitutes a "transparent" autobiography in any traditional sense. Notably, all the main characters, including Akerman's sister, her lover and close friends, are referred to by their initials. They remain ciphers, as in a *Nouveau roman* novel, or in that quintessentially *Nouveau roman* hybrid, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *ciné-roman L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), based on the screenplay for Alain Resnais's eponymous film. Even though the author and the protagonist are identical, as is required by Philippe Lejeune's stipulation of the autobiographical pact,¹⁴ the narrator—the crucial other element that ensures the sealing of the tacit pact between author and reader—cannot always be pinned down. More radical than in *Une famille à Bruxelles*, where the point of view alternated between mother and daughter who, in turn, occupied the first person, here other voices—notably that of the sister and the lover—join in a truly polyphonic chant, which destabilises any fixed identities. Often, the different voices simply alternate in what one could call an "unmarked" form of direct discourse (that is, stretches of dialogue where direct discourse is neither signalled by an introductory clause nor quotation marks):

Et maman tu ne trouves pas qu'elle va mieux, elle n'a pas encore de bons moments, je veux dire de vrais bons moments, mais elle va mieux. Oui, c'est vrai. Mais elle parle moins qu'avant, ça la fatigue. Parfois elle parle et c'est des bons moments pour elle pour l'instant. (108)

But the voice of the other also erupts more drastically amidst the first person through a collision between direct and indirect modes:

D'ailleurs je ne l'aide pas. Elle me l'a dit, tu me fais plus de mal que de bien. Rentre chez toi. Elle n'a pas dit exactement comme ça mais au fond c'est ça que ça voulait dire, en tout cas c'est ça que j'ai compris. (71)

In an idiosyncratic refashioning of the free indirect discourse championed by Flaubert, the quotation marks habitually designating direct

¹⁴Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 14. Lejeune postulates that, for the autobiographical pact to be sealed, the author, narrator and principal protagonist must be identical.

speech are dispensed with, whilst the introductory expressions ("me l'a dit") and the first person (as opposed to the third person in free indirect discourse) are preserved. In most instances, this blending between direct and indirect forms of discourse is short and abrupt, yet an introductory expression ("[c]'est ce que m'a dit ma mère," 29) can also trigger lengthier passages where another character comes to seize the first person, as in the sustained three-page monologue where Akerman ventriloquizes her mother's voice (29–32). The narrative point of view is destabilised further by sudden shifts from internal to external focalisation, which subject mother and daughter to the cool gaze of an external camera eye/I ("Une femme gémit dans son lit," 19; "L'enfant était né vieil enfant et du coup, l'enfant n'était jamais devenu adulte," 25).

Shifts between internal and external perspectives—and by virtue of them, between subject and object positions, observer and observed—are of course a recurrent strategy in women's writing. Splitting the female "I" into first and third person appositely conveys the self-estrangement women suffer in male-dominated power structures that, as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, deny them the right to transcendence.¹⁵ Both Beauvoir in *Les Belles Images* and Marguerite Duras in *L'Amant* make extensive use of this device to expose the multiple pressures society exerts on women to make them conform to an ideal image, perversely coaxing them into internalising the very codes and behaviors that deprive them of their freedom. In a similar vein, Akerman decenters narrative perspective as part of a wider meditation on society's intolerance of otherness (be it sexual, racial or gendered), crystallised in the normalising gaze of the mother, who nudges her daughter to assimilate traditional gender norms.¹⁶ The collision between narrative voices hints at a deeper concern over proximity and distance in interpersonal relationships. Like the neurotic filmmaker in the autofictional *L'Homme à la valise* (played by Akerman herself), who barricades herself in her room for fear of being contaminated by the presence of a male friend, or the aseptically distanced Jeanne Dielman from the eponymous film, who unsuccessfully tries to keep the outside world at bay, the artist speaking in the first person seems permanently threatened by some form of existential dissolution. Unable to delineate clearly its boundaries as a subject, the "je" is at risk of fusing with the other. Akerman herself comments on her dif-

¹⁵Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

¹⁶Cf. "J'avais l'impression parfois qu'on voulait me retoucher moi, je veux dire me changer un peu et puis que tout irait bien et parfois moi aussi j'avais envie de me changer mais ça ne servait à rien" (59) and "Toi aussi tu peux te maquiller, me disait ma mère. . . . Jusqu'à ma mort elle me dira ce genre de chose" (88).

ficulty in accessing an autonomous form of selfhood in the context of *Une famille à Bruxelles*: “je n’ai pas réussi la transition vers l’âge adulte, comme on dit. Il paraît que cela se sent très fortement dans *Une famille à Bruxelles* où l’on ne sait pas si c’est la mère ou la fille qui parle. Ainsi il semble que la séparation a échoué.”¹⁷

Les Mots pour le dire: Silence, Trauma, Truth

From its very first paragraph, *Ma mère rit* tackles the question of truthfulness that, even in the era of autofiction, remains central to the genre of self-writing. In his preamble to the *Confessions*, Rousseau had famously insisted on the veracity of his account: “Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature.”¹⁸ The author here, on the contrary, questions her ability to write truthfully about her experience: “J’ai écrit tout ça et maintenant je n’aime plus ce que j’ai écrit. C’était avant . . . [a]vant que je ne comprenne que je n’avais qu’une vision tronquée et imaginaire. Et que je n’étais capable que de ça. Ni de vérité ni à peine de ma vérité” (9). More than an auto-critique, this surprising incipit alerts readers to the necessarily limited (“tronquée”) and imaginary dimensions of self-writing, postulating a difference between “truth” understood as an absolute term and subjective, personal truth. In a radio interview with Laurent Goumarre, Akerman openly designates her self-portrait as a fictional construction, but contends that, through the fictional mode, she aspires to be true (“C’est de la fiction, parce que dès qu’on écrit on retombe toujours dans la fiction, mais à travers cette fiction ce qui m’importait, était d’être vrai”).¹⁹ What then does “être vrai” mean in the context of an oeuvre where documentary and fiction, real and imagined lives have always intersected? For Akerman, being truthful is perhaps first of all finding a language away from the beaten track of conventional forms that is supple enough to convey emotion. Positioning herself against the prescriptive norms of “literary” style (which she accuses of stifling French cultural production) and in the tradition of “minor writing” analysed by Deleuze and Guattari,²⁰ she invents a highly personal

¹⁷“Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln” 75 (my translation). See also *Ma mère rit* 90: “peut-être . . . que ma mère et moi étions trop liées et que ce lien-là m’avait été fatal.”

¹⁸Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” 1959) I: 5.

¹⁹Laurent Goumarre, “Le RDV 08/09/13 avec Chantal Akerman, Pierre Huyghe et la session de Garifuna Collective,” *France Culture*, 8 October 2013.

²⁰Akerman frequently draws on Deleuze and Guattari in her writing and interviews to undergird her position as a “critical” filmmaker who questions the practices of mainstream cinema as well as their underlying ideologies and value systems. See for instance her interview with Goumarre.

idiom that gives voice to her internal trepidations—a living, “bleeding” language carved out from the depth of her interiority.²¹ Hardly revised, *Ma mère rit* captures the spontaneity of thought in a labyrinthine narrative, whose repetitions and ruminations—a process of mulling over the author herself calls *ressassement*²²—recall the sinuous style of a Beckett, Perec, Duras or, in Germanophone writing, Thomas Bernhard. Frequent qualifiers (“sans doute,” “ou pas,” “je ne sais pas,” “ce n’est pas vrai”) acknowledge the limitations of knowing oneself and others inherent in any autobiographical project. Anaphoric and paratactic, visceral and raw, Akerman’s prose readily dispenses with standard punctuation as well as other linguistic markers of literariness: the preference for nominal phrases, incomplete sentences, and predominantly familiar register combined with spoken rhythms and interjections designate the style as oral. In its chant-like flow, it recalls the prayers recited in the synagogue, and, thus, the Jewish oral tradition that the artist has cited as a major influence on her filmic dialogues and her written style.²³

As with so much of Akerman’s work, beneath its preoccupation with a quotidian that is difficult to bear, *Ma mère rit* touches upon questions of Jewish memory and the Holocaust intimately bound up with her mother’s internment and the murder of several close members of her family in Auschwitz. In interviews and in *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, Akerman repeatedly speaks about the ways in which her mother’s silence about her life in the camps has shaped the daughter’s imaginary, hinting at the transgenerational trauma that is transferred from the first generation of Holocaust survivors to their children. It is worth drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory” for a moment to understand better the connectedness between the mother’s experience and that of her daughter that intersect in the self-portrait.²⁴ Unlike the members of what Hirsch calls the second generation, who grew up with stories of trauma “transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right,”²⁵ Akerman was faced with a deeply disturbing gap in her

²¹Cf. Bérénice Clerk’s pertinent phrase: “Chantal Akerman saigne en langue vivante” (“‘Ma mère rit’: La puissance d’une vie bouleversée par Chantal Akerman,” *Toute la culture*. Web. <<http://toutelaculture.com/livres/ma-mere-rit-la-puissance-dune-vie-bouleversée-par-chantal-akerman/>> [accessed 14 November 2014]).

²²*Autoportrait en cinéaste* 9.

²³*Autoportrait en cinéaste* 24.

²⁴For the concept of “postmemory” see Marianne Hirsch’s seminal article “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103–28 and her monograph *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia, 2012).

²⁵*The Generation of Postmemory* 5.

family story. The very absence of family memories, she explains in *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, at first prompted her to invent false memories, indeed an alternative autobiography: “Un enfant avec une histoire pleine de trous, ne peut que se réinventer une mémoire. . . . Alors l’autobiographie dans tout ça ne peut être que réinventée.”²⁶ In tune with the move towards a more overtly autobiographical engagement with her family story already mentioned, *Ma mère rit* articulates the daughter’s struggle to constitute an identity for herself in the shadows of the Holocaust in tandem with her mother’s difficulty in breaking the silence. Akerman for the first time claims her own story—the story of someone from the “generation after,” which, as Hirsch has argued, risks being “displaced, even evacuated, by [one’s] ancestors”²⁷—while remaining attentive to her mother’s past and present suffering. The narrative charts both the mother and her daughter’s struggle to speak of their experience, to find “les mots pour le dire,” to use the title of Marie Cardinal’s autobiographical book on her coming to terms with a different type of traumatic experience rooted in a blighted parent-child relation.²⁸ For Akerman’s mother, talking about her past is perceived as a threat, even an annihilation of selfhood (“Ma grande fille me demande toujours d’en parler mais je ne veux pas. Je sais que si je le fais je suis perdue,” 30). While, for a long time, she spoke “pour remuer le vide, pour cacher le vide,” as the artist explains in an interview with Frédéric Bonnaud, she eventually began to talk about her experience.²⁹ Likewise, the daughter, who had only fleetingly evoked her own illness in interviews and in *Une famille à Bruxelles*, asserts its place in her and her family’s history alongside the stories of first-generation survivors (88). Both mother and daughter wrestle to find a way to “parler dans le vrai,”³⁰ to connect with and articulate their suffering and grief. “Being truthful,” then, beyond questions of style and language, is above all an unadorned honesty with regard to oneself and others, be it at the risk of hurting those to whom we are closest. Significantly, it is when the mother becomes aggressive towards her daughter, whose negligent appearance compromises her sense of order—an obsession with cleanliness and tidiness Akerman interprets as a symptom of her mother’s trauma—that “quelque chose de vrai s’était passé” (48). Truth, as Akerman reflects in conversation with Alain Veinstein, does not yield itself easily. It requires a willingness to

²⁶*Autoportrait en cinéaste* 30.

²⁷*The Generation of Postmemory* 5.

²⁸Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1977).

²⁹“Portrait du passé, portrait d’une génération.”

³⁰See interview with Bonnaud.

what she calls “aller chercher au plus loin”³¹ in reference to Proust, one of the tutelary figures of her work alongside Levinas, Walter Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as a fellow writer grappling with an overpowering mother figure. Long submerged and obscure, truth erupts in sudden epiphanic flashes:

il y a quelque chose qui se passe souterrainement et lentement parfois très lentement quand vous n’y pensez même plus, tout d’un coup cette vérité apparaît et c’est un moment extraordinaire et qui n’arrive pas tous les jours et c’est bon, c’est tellement bon que soudain vous vous sentez légère et calme. (37)

Both for mother and daughter, these glimpses of truth hold a transformative, regenerating power. Where, through words, the mother is finally able to work through her traumatic experience, the daughter, by virtue of writing, seeks to understand her mental disorder and to come to terms with the failed relationship with C. If self-knowledge is difficult to obtain, the author comes to understand, only writing has the capacity to heal: “la seule chose qui sauve c’est l’écriture” (39).³²

Life? Or Cinema?³³

As is the convention of the “Traits et portraits” series of which *Ma mère rit* forms a part, the self-portrait is richly illustrated with photos from Akerman’s family album as well as stills from her films and video installations and, not least, a number of artistic photos taken by the author herself, who thus adds the photographic medium to her already broad artistic palette. Chosen by the series editor, with their sparse captions relegated to the back matter, these illustrations at first seem to fulfil the purely documentary function photographs occupy in traditional autobiographies. Yet though Akerman does not construct her narrative around the images nor indeed offer any direct comment on

³¹Alain Veinstein, *Du jour au lendemain*, France Culture, 7 November 2013.

³²The idea of writing as salvation is once again indebted to Proust, but here comes with a typically Akermanian qualifier: “Et encore” (39).

³³My title is adapted from Charlotte Salomon’s *Leben? oder Theater?*, an extraordinary series of 1325 gouaches and transparencies in which the German-Jewish artist portrays her life’s story and that of her family against the backdrop of the rise of the Nazi regime. She was killed in Auschwitz at the age of 26. Her work, which juxtaposes text and image, was exhibited at the Jewish Museum Berlin in 2007 alongside Akerman’s installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*. For a sensitive reading of the two installations see Lisa Saltzman, “A Matrix of Matrilinear Memory in the Museum: Charlotte Salomon and Chantal Akerman in Berlin,” *Visualizing and Exhibiting Jewish Space and History*, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Oxford, New York: Published for the Institute by Oxford UP, 2012) 204–16.

them—unlike, for instance, Perec in *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* or Annie Ernaux in *L'Usage de la photo*—they are nonetheless not confined to the referential “ça-a-été” which Barthes assigns to photography in *La Chambre claire*.³⁴ The welding of the autobiographical and the fictional that is effected in this heterogeneous corpus of illustrations, where personal photos of the artist's archive blend with visual documents of her (auto)fictional creations, prompts readers to reflect on the porous boundaries and multiple pathways between life and art. The textual and the visual intersect in a sustained dialogue between lived and represented experience that dissolves the generic boundaries of autobiography or, to be more specific, of photobiography.

The book's banner, adorned with a still from Akerman's experimental documentary *Là-bas* (2006), defies the referentiality of autobiographical writing while remaining deeply rooted in lived experience. The image freezes one of the film's seminal, perpetually varied shots: a framed view of the outside world taken through the lowered blinds of the apartment in Tel Aviv where the artist stayed during a teaching stint. Emblematic of Akerman's distanced, distilled approach to the moving image (replicated in the distancing strategies of her writing), to readers familiar with her filmography this hazy, painterly composition instantly evokes some of the thematic preoccupations that traverse her moving image work and which will be developed further in this text: confinement, depression, the artist's grappling with her Jewish identity and traumatic family history. Signifying both Israel and the camps in family parlance,³⁵ “Là-bas” is a slippery signifier heralding a text which, like the documentary film, glides from inside to outside, from introspection to intense scrutiny of others. In resonance with the surrounding narrative, other stills, most notably an image from *Jeanne Dielman* showing the eponymous character (played by Delphine Seyrig) contemplating herself in a mirror and two shots from Akerman's first documentary *Hotel Monterey*—all printed double-page—trigger a curious oscillation between lived and filmed experiences. We cannot help but make links between the controlled Jeanne Dielman and the artist's mother, between the solitary woman in *Hotel Monterey* and the

³⁴“Dans la photographie, je ne puis jamais nier que *la chose a été là*. Il y a double position conjointe: de réalité et de passé. . . . Ce que j'intentionnalise dans une photo (ne parlons pas encore du cinéma), ce n'est ni l'Art, ni la Communication, c'est la Référence qui est l'ordre fondateur de la Photographie. Le nom du noème de la photographie sera donc : ‘Ça-a-été’” (Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 120.

³⁵Cf: “Ma mère m'a dit un jour, en sortant de là-bas mon cœur était mort” (*Ma mère rit*, 107).

widowed Natalia Akerman. Pictures from films in which Akerman plays herself—the early short *La Chambre* (1972) and the burlesque television drama *L'Homme à la valise*—further interrogate the link between life and creation. Embedded into the narrative of Akerman's wandering, nomadic life, the still of her pushing a suitcase along a corridor from *L'Homme à la valise* (27) is emblematic of a wider literalization of the filmic image, which is mapped onto the life story as if it were a personal document. Images such as these not only raise questions as to the ontological status of the film still—not precisely a photograph, yet no longer a film either; frozen in time, but “snatched” from a moving image continuum, it is itself quintessentially liminal³⁶—but also about the difference between personal photographs showing Akerman and her family and images where the self is staged as part of a filmic *mise-en-scène*. Do only the latter partake in what Magali Nachtergaele has so aptly termed the “mythologisation of the self”³⁷ inherent in photobiography or are all visual documents incorporated in the text affected by a process of fictionalization? Is the textual *autoportrait en vieil enfant*³⁸ painted in *Ma mère rit* perhaps no less staged than these visual portraits of the artist as an *actrice-cinéaste*? Nachtergaele's analysis of the unsettling role of photography in self-writing eminently holds true in the context of this more heterogeneous corpus which includes non-photographic visual images: “la photographie loin d'authentifier les propos de l'autobiographe, participe à la dispersion d'une identité en fragments, et par conséquent à sa déréalisation, comme si elle court-circuitait à la fois le travail d'illusion narrative et le pacte de vérité autobiographique.”³⁹

If the visual materials—in particular those relating to Akerman's moving image work—unsettle the autobiographical pact, inversely, the text itself is strongly inflected by the cinema. In its close attention to setting, space, gesture and voice, the prose exhibits a cinematic sensitivity, matched by the quasi-cinematic editing of the textual fragments into a succession of scenes, the frequent shifts of point of view (resembling a camera embracing another conscience), and spoken character of the dialogues. Catherine Millet has made an interesting link between Akerman's scanning of interiority in the book and the

³⁶On the history and nature of the film still see Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011) 124–31.

³⁷Nachtergaele, *Les Mythologies individuelles*.

³⁸“L'enfant était né vieil enfant et du coup, l'enfant n'était jamais devenu adulte. Il évoluait dans le monde des adultes comme un vieil enfant, et y arrivait mal. Le vieil enfant se disait que si sa mère disparaissait, il n'aurait plus nulle part où revenir” (25).

³⁹Nachtergaele, “Photographie et machineries fictionnelles.”

experimental cinema which shaped her aesthetic in the 1970s: “Son propre cinéma en [du cinéma expérimental] a gardé quelque chose. De même son écriture enregistre la pensée comme elle va et vient et se perd et revient sur elle-même, comme un œil numérique scanne un corps dans ses moindres replis.”⁴⁰ Yet borrowings from cinematic techniques are of course quite common in modern and contemporary writing, and far from surprising in an author, who remains first and foremost a filmmaker.⁴¹ Beyond a merely stylistic convergence between verbal and visual practices, what is perhaps more striking in this text are the manifold thematic echoes with Akerman’s filmic work. Only one of her films, the self-portrait *Portrait d’une paresseuse*, is mentioned explicitly in *Ma mère rit* (174). However, readers familiar with her filmic oeuvre are bound to experience uncanny moments of *déjà-vu* in a number of scenes that seem to rework the cinematic fictions in writing.

Let us take for example the passage on the adolescent Akerman’s un-avowed love for an older girl from secondary school, elliptically called P. The chateau-like school building in the middle of a park; Chantal’s bonding with the long-haired blonde girl but unawareness of the true nature of her feelings; their walks along the tree-lined paths of the school grounds: all this echoes her autobiographically inspired *Portrait d’une jeune fille à la fin des années soixante à Bruxelles* (1993), a coming-of-age story revolving around Michèle’s (Circé Lethem) unspoken attraction to her school friend Danielle (Joëlle Marlier) in the wider context of a triangular love relationship. Although *Ma mère rit* includes a still of the film (152), its insertion into the narrative some forty pages before the memory of adolescent love makes the link less explicit. Curiously, Akerman’s description of her homoerotic attraction to P. also seems to intersect with a novel which we have already encountered: Duras’s *L’Amant*, one of the seminal texts of French autofiction and a photobiography of sorts even if the “image absolue” to which the text insistently returns—that is, the picture of the fifteen-and-a-half-year-old Marguerite crossing the Mekong River—was never taken.⁴² The beloved girl’s marriage, her life in a “pays chaud qui vivait dans la guerre” (191), and, not least, the night the two

⁴⁰Catherine Millet, “Portraits de famille,” *Le Monde*, 8 November 2013.

⁴¹For a classic study of the borrowings American writers of the first half of the twentieth century made from cinema see Claude-Edmonde Magny, *L’Âge du roman américain* (Paris: Seuil, 1948). On hybridisations and crossovers between the two media see Jean Cléder, *Entre littérature et cinéma: les affinités électives* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

⁴²On *L’Amant* as a photobiography see Arribert-Narce, “De la ‘notation’ à la ‘fictionalisation’” 227–28.

girls spend together in the same bed are reminiscent of Marguerite's infatuation with a girl from her boarding school, the "incomparable" Hélène Lagonelle.⁴³

Life, literature and cinematic creation converge further in the description of Akerman's tormented relationship with C., which resonates with her free adaptation of Proust, *La Captive* (2000). The lover's pathological jealousy, her incessant scrutiny of Chantal's every gesture and surveillance of her private life, evoke Proust's disenchanted vision of love as an anxiety-fueled prison, compellingly mapped onto a late-twentieth-century couple in Akerman's cinematic reworking. A tacit presence in the book as we already observed, Proust becomes a prism through which to read both the relationship with C. and the affective attachment to the mother—thus establishing an implicit connection between the two. Finally, one of the great moments of redemption at the end of the book—the first genuine exchange between mother and daughter—recalls both the autobiographically inspired *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, where the filmmaker Anna (an alter ego of the director) confides her relationship with another woman to her mother, and the mother's sharing of her own mother's diary with her daughter in the autofictional *Demain on déménage*. Here, in the intimacy of the mother's bedroom, well into the night, daughter and mother both break their silence, Chantal telling Natalia about her experience with C., while her mother, for the first time, discloses her epistolary relationship with an Israeli soldier after her return from Auschwitz (181).

What are we to make of these communicating vessels that link autobiography, literature and film within the wider project of self-writing? Is this a case of life imitating art, as postulated provocatively in Oscar Wilde's anti-mimetic manifesto-essay "The Decay of Lying"?⁴⁴ Or rather, as with the incorporated visual documents, does the porosity between the various media and genres hint at the mutual irrigation between life and art in the creative work of Akerman, who, like her fellow artists Boltanski and Calle, carves out pathways between lived and represented experience? In the wake of poststructuralism, critics are agreed that life-writing cannot be kept totally separate from fiction: any attempt at recounting one's life, however objective or truthful it purports to be, is always already a form of narration with

⁴³Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984) 89–94.

⁴⁴Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), vol. 4: Criticism: *Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*.

its ensuing fashioning and construction of the self through narrative and stylistic devices—not to mention the unreliability and subjectivity of memory, dramatized in many autofictional works, nor indeed the limited autonomy and fragmentation of the self so forcefully posited by structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers.⁴⁵ Max Saunders in *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* argues that, in the postmodern era, the frontiers between biography, autobiography and fiction have become increasingly blurred, creating new types of texts, for which he coins the neologisms “auto/biography” and “autobiografiction.” Expanding on Doubrovsky’s coinage “autofiction,” which was concerned with the relations between fiction and the self, his composite “autobiografiction” implies “both that auto/biography can be read as fiction, and that fiction can be read as autobiographical.”⁴⁶ The hybrid textualities of artists such as Akerman, Annie Ernaux, Hervé Guibert, Boltanski or Calle further explode these categories through their incorporation of visual documents into texts of life-writing, or, inversely, through injecting the autobiographical into their visual work.

It is no coincidence that *Ma mère rit* was first made public as part of a multimedia event at the Theatre du Châtelet for the 2013 installment of the Paris *Nuit blanche*. Akerman’s reading of the text was followed by a screening of her installation *Une voix dans le désert* (2003), itself based on the last two sequences of her documentary *De l’autre côté* (2002). From self-writing to a documentary “bordering on fiction”⁴⁷ the link may at first seem tenuous. Yet what is at stake in both works—and in Akerman’s oeuvre more widely—is a continued questioning of borders and frontiers, be they geographical, generic or medial and a staging of the porous boundaries between life and art. “True” art for Akerman is work where the personal and the collective—what with Perec one may call “la petite et la grande histoire”⁴⁸—along with lived and represented experience mingle in a sustained attempt to speak and make visible the frailty of human existence.

⁴⁵On the impact of structuralist and poststructuralist thought on the autobiographical genre see Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007) 22–26.

⁴⁶Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) 7.

⁴⁷On Akerman’s documentaries “bordering on fiction” see Kathy Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins, eds., *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman’s D’Est* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995) and my *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010) chapter 3.

⁴⁸Cf. Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 17: “une autre histoire, la Grande, l’Histoire avec sa grande hache.”

The troubling narrative of *Ma mère rit* is framed by a sequence in the present that recounts Natalia Akerman's quasi-miraculous recovery, her acceptance of her daughter's difference, and the artist's own renewed connection with her former lover M. As in a mirror image of this narrative framing, the textual material also is entwined with two photographs: it opens with a poetic still from the semi-documentary *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989), portraying a dancer skipping gracefully along a New York inner-city wasteland where members of the Jewish diaspora have gathered for a communal dinner; and ends with a still from the video installation *Maniac Shadows* (2013), showing Akerman's shadow and that of M. fused in an image of love. For all its echoes and intermedial layers, its interrogations and uncertainties, *Ma mère rit* is also—perhaps most importantly as is hinted at in these images—a story of reconciliation and a celebration of resilience in the face of adversity. An ode to the mother, who was at the center of her oeuvre, it is the gift of an artist who will be remembered for her deeply personal and empathetic vision of human existence.

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